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Lincoln



Class *F 12*

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PRESENTED BY



Speech of Hon. Luke E. Wright, Secretary of War,
Delivered at the centennial celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birth,
February 12, 1909, near Hodgenville, Ky.

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We are assembled to-day upon the spot where Abraham Lincoln was born, to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of his birth. When we look about us and behold a great and prosperous State teeming with population and all the evidences of a highly developed and complex civilization, it requires an effort of the memory to recall how crude and primitive were his surroundings when his eyes first saw the light and during his boyhood.

He was born of humble parentage in a rude cabin of logs. His entry into the world was accompanied by no omens, and no seer prognosticated his future fame. Apparently his only heritage was to be a life of ignorance and poverty.

Still, it would be misleading to infer that the future could hold no prize for him. The hardy adventurers who swarmed out from the older colonies and crossed the Alleghenies, were the off-shoot of that older

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stock of English, Scotch and Irish which had crossed the seas and had founded the first colonies upon American soil. They were a simple, God-fearing people who lived their lives in field and forest, uncorrupted by wealth, strengthened in body and mind by hardships and dangers endured and overcome, with imaginations quickened by the thought that a continent was theirs. Whilst there were instances among them of men of gentle birth and comparative fortune, yet all stood upon terms of perfect equality, and opportunity for all was practically the same. Any substantial distinction between the greatest and the humblest man, under such circumstances, could only be one created by individual prowess or worth.

There is perhaps in all the world no fairer land, no territory combining more natural advantages, and none more favorable to the development of a virile race, than that vast area which gradually falls away from the western side of the Allegheny mountains.

It is a curious fact that Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were born in the same State, that their parents were almost neighbors, and

equally curious that in after life in a great civil war they should have been leaders on opposite sides. They began under the same environment, and yet how widely separated were they in their subsequent lives and fortunes! In the Two-Ocean Pass in the Yellowstone Park is found a level spot hemmed in by surrounding hills into which flows a stream which there divides, one part flowing into the Pacific and the other into the Atlantic; and this stream is typical of the careers of the two men. Davis in early manhood found himself living in a community in which slavery was a recognized institution, and himself became a slave-holder as were his neighbors and friends; whilst Lincoln found himself in a free-soil State where slavery was regarded a crime.

From the foundation of the Federal Government the right of a State to withdraw from the Federal compact was more or less discussed. It is not too much to say that the founders purposely pretermitted any explicit declaration on the subject, and thereafter it was regarded as an open question as to which intelligent and patriotic men might and did differ. This difference was for many years not sectional, but gradually became so

after slavery became distinctly a Southern institution and the agitation in favor of its limitation or abolition became a burning issue.

Yet it would be unfair to say that there was a complete unanimity of sentiment upon this subject on either side of Mason and Dixon's line. In the border States of the South especially, the majority of the people were opposed to the dogma of secession, as was demonstrated by the overwhelming majority against the ordinances of secession submitted to the people in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee a few months before the outbreak of hostilities. Moreover, in these same border States it was generally conceded that slavery was morally indefensible and that some means should be adopted looking to gradual emancipation. But the practical difficulty confronting those thus thinking was, what would be the status of the slave when freed, coupled with the feeling that to make him a free man dependent upon his own resources would, in a vast majority of instances, be inhumane and decree his ultimate extinction. Even in the North there was a large element of intelligent and conservative men who deprecated the agitation against slavery and had not brought themselves to

consent to the thought of coercion in the event of secession. But the continued propaganda preached against slavery and the extreme utterances of partisans on either side unquestionably by degrees had the effect of drawing a clear line of demarkation between the North and the South, both as to slavery and secession.

I do not refer to this ancient history for the purpose of reviving discussions long since dead and buried, but merely to call attention to facts which have perhaps been obscured by the overwhelming events which followed. It can only be a matter of surmise and profitless speculation as to what would have happened had the Southern people been left to deal with this perplexing question in their own way. Perhaps slavery was too strongly rooted to be eradicated save by fire and sword, and it may be that in the mysterious movings of a Divine Providence the sins of the fathers were visited upon the children and that the South paid the penalty for the violation of a great moral law. But it ought to be remembered, and I believe is now being remembered more and more, that it was not alone the sin of the South, although its expiation fell heaviest upon her people.

In reading the public utterances of Mr. Lincoln during this period of bitter discussion, nothing has impressed me more than the singular clearness of his perception that the responsibility for slavery rested upon all our people and was a burden which should be borne by all alike. There was a temperance of statement, a respect for the opposite point of view, and a moderation in his positions, which, when the excitement of the time is considered, is most extraordinary and must command our admiration. Well would it have been for all our people had they been able to approach this burning question with the same conservatism and good sense. I have sometimes thought that this was to some extent due to the fact that his birth and early youth were in a slave-holding State, and that he understood the attitude and feeling of its people to a degree not possible for one born and reared in a community where slavery had long been unknown. He sincerely believed in an indissoluble Union. He sincerely believed that slavery was a curse and a great moral wrong; and in believing thus he was right. He was opposed not only to its extension but believed that gradual emancipation was a possibility worth striving for; and yet he respected the Constitution

and did not believe in the right to extinguish slavery by force. In all the speeches he made there can be found no word of ill will or malice towards the Southern people, and in reading his utterances no Southern man finds himself entertaining the slightest sentiment of resentment towards him or ought save admiration for his sincerity, friendliness and broad humanity.

His first inaugural address, delivered at a time when passion was at its height and Civil War was imminent, is pathetic in its appeals for peace and union. His great heart seemed rent in twain when he finished by saying—

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Alas that the still, small voice of moderation and reason was drowned in the angry cries of determined men marshalling for a conflict, the magnitude of which few if any appreciated, and the consequences of which few

if any foresaw. And yet there were among the combatants tens of thousands of men who felt the sweet reasonableness of his dispassionate statements, whose hearts were touched by his pathetic cry for peace, and yet who, caught up in the rising excitement of the time, aligned themselves under the stress of circumstances on the one side or the other;— tens of thousands of men on both sides deploring war, yet when war seemed inevitable, ranging themselves with their neighbors. It seemed the very irony of fate that so gentle a spirit, so sympathetic and kindly a nature, should be forced by the stern logic of events over which he had no control and for which he was in no way responsible, to assume the role of Commander-in-Chief in a sanguinary Civil War between men of the same blood and the same traditions.

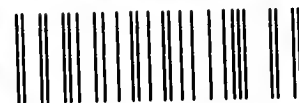
The years of war and destruction during which he was President, whilst they plowed deep lines of care and grief upon his ^{hag-ridden} ~~homely~~ face and wrung his gentle heart, provoked no expressions of bitterness from his lips. His many acts of personal kindness to Southern prisoners and Southern sympathizers demonstrated how free from the spirit of malice or vengeance he was. As in the progress of time it became evident the Union arms would triumph, he

evinced no feeling of exultation or sense of personal triumph, but only an anxious desire to restore the Southern States to their former place in the Union, and to heal the wounds of civil strife. He was opposed to extreme measures against the Southern people, and was prepared to stand between them and the radicals of his party who clamored for exemplary reprisals upon a conquered people whom the fortunes of war had delivered into their hands. That he would have succeeded in carrying with him the great majority of the people of the North in his beneficent purposes, does not to my mind admit of doubt; and that there would have followed speedily a Union of hearts, is equally certain. It was indeed cruel that at the moment when he had reached the point for which he had striven, he should have died at the hands of a hair-brained ~~man~~ actor who was in no way identified with the South or her people. Still more cruel was fate to the Southern people. They shuddered both at the dastardly act of his assassination and at the disastrous consequences to themselves as well which they knew would follow. The dies iras of reconstruction was the inevitable result, and reconstruction did more to postpone reconciliation than did war itself. It was direful

in its results to both sections, and to the negroes in greater measure if possible than to the whites.

But time has brought healing on its wings. A new generation of men has been born since Lincoln died. The animosities of the old days are ended. As we look back across the dead years we see his homely figure standing out clear and large. He is not awesome nor repellant. There is an expression of pathos, touched with humor, upon his face which draws us strongly, and there is sunshine all about him. He seems to speak and we again to hear him say: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have estrained it must not break our bonds of affection." And thus hearing, the men of the South can not only look back upon a lost cause without bitterness, but recognize it was best that it did fail. And they can and do without bitterness and in all sincerity, join with all the people of this Nation and all the people of all Nations in paying tribute to Abraham Lincoln - the liberator - the pacificator - the great American.

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